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# Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin

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Gold Bowl

Facsimile of Inscription

Greek, 7th century B.C.

## A Votive Offering of the Kypselids

THERE has just been placed in the Stone Room of the Evans Galleries of Paintings an object of very exceptional interest, both on account of what it purports to be and of the discussion which this claim naturally awakens. This is a bowl of gold about six inches in diameter and three inches high, in practically perfect preservation excepting that it has been pressed out of its original circular shape. An inscription, reproduced above, places and dates the bowl in Greece in the seventh century B.C.; yet the preservation of such an object unknown until the present is a marvel not readily to be accepted. After careful examination and long consideration the bowl has been purchased for the Museum from the Francis Bartlett Fund. Among the immediate purposes suggested in Mr. Bartlett's letter of gift of April 6, 1912, the acquisition of works of art "which will add distinction to the collections of classical antiquities" is named first. The bowl will eventually be installed in the Archaic Room of the Classical Wing of the Museum.

In the treasury erected at Delphi by Kypselos, tyrant of Corinth, in the seventh century B. C., Herodotus saw six gold kraters, or mixing-bowls, weighing together thirty talents, which had been dedicated by Gyges, king of Lydia, and a gold lion, a gift of Croesus, which had weighed ten talents. The Clazomenian treasury in the same sanctuary contained a gold bowl weighing nearly nine talents, also a gift of Croesus. In the treasury of the Massiliots was kept another gold bowl, which the Romans had dedicated as a trophy of their conquest of Veii. Near the temple of Apollo four pedestals have been found which supported gold cauldrons dedicated by Gelon, tyrant of Syracuse, and his brothers to commemorate their victory over the Carthaginians in 480 B.C. According to one tradition these bowls weighed in all fifty talents. Much more magnificent was the trophy

which the Greek states erected nearby from the spoils of Plataea. It also was a gold cauldron, set upon a great tripod of bronze. Its base has been found *in situ*; and the central support, a column eighteen feet high, composed of three intertwined serpents, which was carried off by the emperor Constantine, is still standing in the hippodrome at Constantinople. The cauldron itself, together with the lion of Croesus, is said to have been melted down by the Phocians to pay their troops in the Sacred War of the fourth century B. C. In the days of Plutarch none of the Lydian offerings were left in the treasury of Kypselos. And before the Delphian sanctuary fell into complete decay it must have been thoroughly plundered of all that remained of its treasures of gold, whose aggregate weight would have to be computed in tons.

The bowl recently acquired by the Museum is not comparable in weight to the cauldrons just enumerated (it weighs about thirty ounces or one-thirtieth of a talent), but it is of unique interest as the only known example of this class of dedications, and especially because it bears an inscription in archaic Corinthian characters as follows: *Κυψελίδαι ἀνέθεν ἐξ Ἡρακλείας* — "The sons of Kypselos dedicated (this bowl) from Herakleia." It thus appears to have been one of the less conspicuous members of the group of offerings — *Κυψελιδῶν ἀναθήματα* — which the Corinthian tyrant and his sons dedicated at Olympia and Delphi, and which became proverbial in later times for their splendor. The inscription does not mention the divinity to whom this gift was made. According to the vendor (who was not the finder) the bowl was discovered some five years ago at Olympia, east of the Altis, between the stadium and the river Alpheios, in the bank of one of the small torrents formed by winter rains, which wash down earth from the hill of Kronos. In mediaeval times the bed of the Alpheios ran through that region. Unfortunately there is little hope that this account of the provenance can ever be verified, and the

authenticity of the bowl established on irrefragable external proof. It was purchased, and is here published in the belief that it bears in itself sufficient evidence to overcome the skepticism with which so surprising a find is at first bound to be received.

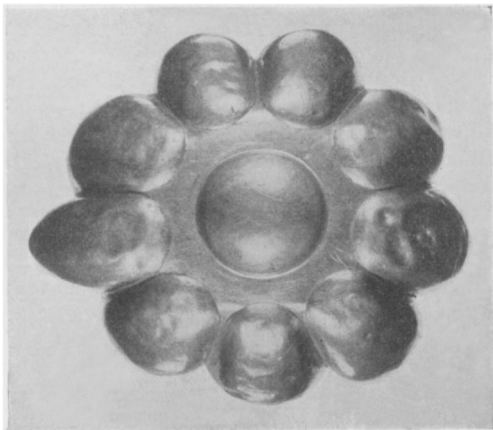
The material is native gold. Professor T. W. Richards, to whom the Museum is greatly indebted for the accurate determination of the specific gravity of the metal, reports that the weight of the bowl is 836.469 grammes, and the loss of weight in water 45.839 grammes. The specific gravity calculated from these results is 18.25; corrected to the vacuum standard this would be 18.23. If pure gold is taken as having a specific gravity of 19.3, the bowl contains 7 per cent. of silver, assuming that silver is the only impurity. This means that the gold is 22.3 carat. Professor Richards remarks further that "the color of the bowl is essentially that of pure gold. It appears to contain far less silver than is commonly used for alloying with gold in ordinary manufacture. On the other hand, the above estimate indicates an amount of silver not unusual in native gold." Besides silver the bowl contains numerous minute particles of a hard white metal—platinum or osmium-iridium—such as appear in many pieces of ancient Egyptian gold-work. Two of these particles can easily be seen with the naked eye, and a cursory examination with a magnifying glass of low power disclosed some thirty more. Specks of iridium occur in commercially refined gold of the present day,\* but their presence in such numbers and size—one is 3 mm. long—taken into consideration with the admixture of silver, would seem to prove the native quality of the gold.

The vessel is to be classed as a *φιάλη μεσόμφαλος*, that is, a libation bowl with a central boss, which

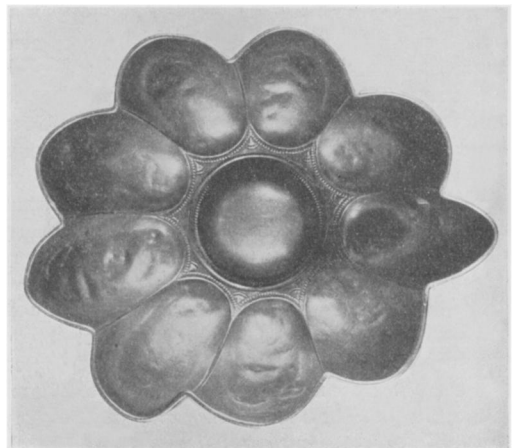
had the practical function of making it easier to hold while pouring. It varies, however, from the prevailing type in its depth and its fluted surface. The greatest diameter was about 16.8 cm.; the height nearly half as much. The walls rise steeply, the bearing surface having a diameter about equal to the height. The whole bowl has been violently pressed out of its original circular shape; and the upper contours of the nine lobes, which approximated arcs of circles with a diameter equal to that of the boss, have been similarly distorted. There are several deep dents in the walls, and the whole external surface is covered with innumerable fine scratches. In the interior the chief marks of wear are on the convex surface of the boss; the fluted walls have here more nearly kept their original polish. Except for a place on the rim where a paring has evidently been taken since the discovery for the purpose of testing the material, all the injuries and marks of wear appear perfectly natural. When the bowl was brought to the Museum traces of a reddish earthen deposit remained in the crevices between the lobes, in the letters of the inscription, and in the depressed circle around the boss, together with minute particles of gravel.

Fluted bowls are almost unknown before the end of the classical period. The examples which first suggest themselves are the silver bowls of late Roman date which have been found in France and Germany. But these differ widely in technique, form and decoration. They are cast in a mould, whereas our bowl was beaten out. Hammer marks are visible in the external, concave surface of the boss; and the walls, which are 2mm. thick at the top, decrease to about 1mm. near the bottoms of the flutes. The Roman examples are much shallower; they lack the central boss; their flutes are smaller and more numerous. Even if no early Greek examples had survived it would be safe to say that this type of bowl was invented before the days of Roman silversmiths or the designers of modern pudding-moulds. As a matter of fact

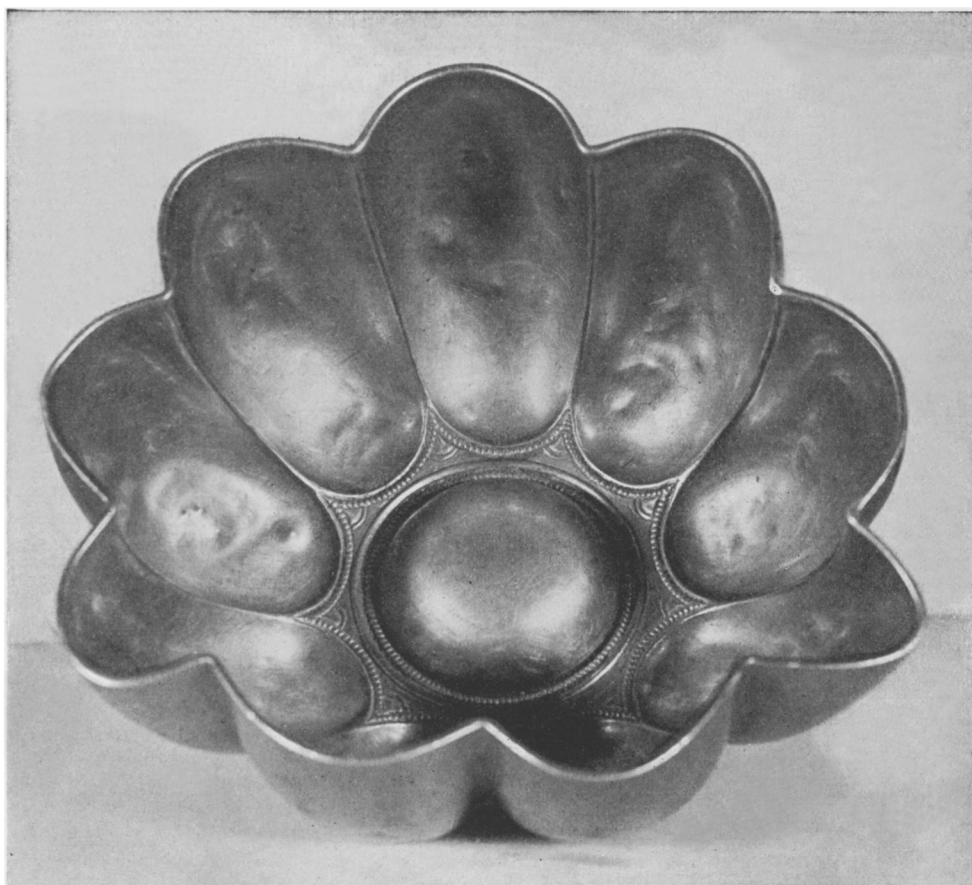
\*Cf. T. Kirke Rose, *The Metallurgy of Gold*, 6th edition, 1915, p. 435. For this reference the writer is indebted to Mrs. Caroline Ransom Williams, who also first called his attention to the similar specks in Egyptian gold. The subject will be discussed by Mrs. Williams in her catalogue of the Abbott collection of jewelry in the New York Historical Society.



Exterior



Interior



*Gold Bowl*

Purchased, 1921, from the Francis Bartlett Fund

*Greek, 7th century B. C.*

analogies are not entirely lacking. Among the early votive offerings found at the Argive Heraeum are some small bronze saucers with crimped edges. The closest parallel is, however, to be found at Olympia itself. The libation bowls brought to light by the excavations include one hammered out of a thin sheet of bronze, with a boss and nine large flutes; it is probably to be dated in the seventh or sixth century, B. C.

The decoration, which has been wrongly criticised as too simple and commonplace, is confined to the central portion of the interior. The boss is surrounded by two raised circles, one of them delicately beaded. Similar beading outlines the curved terminations of the flutes. Further ornamentation would have been out of keeping with the design, which was evidently chosen by the artist because the play of light on the concave and convex surfaces brings out to the full the beauty of the material, the quality called by Theognis "the pure bloom of gold"—*χρυσοῦ καθαρὸν ἄνθος*.

Such offerings as this, though they were wrought into shapes of beauty or symbolic significance, were primarily gifts of a definite amount of gold. In extant temple inventories hundreds of vessels of precious metal are listed with a statement of their weight in round numbers of drachmae or staters. It is therefore noteworthy that this bowl weighs very nearly one hundred shekels, or two minae, of the lighter Babylonian standard, from which the system of weights introduced at Corinth in the seventh century is generally held to have been derived. The earliest Corinthian staters, struck in the reign of Periander, if not in that of Kypselos himself, weigh close to 8.4 grammes or one hundredth of the weight of the bowl. An example in the Museum collection is illustrated below.

The inscription, placed on two adjacent flutes just below the rim, is here reproduced in a full-size facsimile. The letters are not engraved, but stamped, so that traces of them appear on the interior surface. Three tools seem to have been used,—a tubular puncheon for the circles of the *koppa* and *theta*, and small, blunt chisels, one twice as long as the other, for the straight strokes. The letters were executed by a skilled and practised hand; no flaw is to be detected in their shapes or placing. From the initial *koppa* to the final *san* the signs employed conform to the oldest Corinthian alphabet of which we have record. The omission of the aspirate at the beginning of the last word is noticeable, but it can be paralleled in early Corinthian inscriptions. As regards the wording, the failure to mention the god to whom the bowl was dedicated is unusual; but again parallels can be found among the votive offerings at Olympia. The same may be said for the use of the preposition *ἐξ* instead of *ἀπό*, which is more frequently used in this formula.

That the event commemorated by this dedication should be mentioned among the scanty records of the age of the Kypselids which have come down

to us was hardly to be expected. The circumstances can, however, be reconstructed with a certain degree of plausibility. The rise of the tyrants in the Greek city states resulted from the disturbance of the economic basis of society brought about by colonization and the expansion of commerce in the seventh century. Under Kypselos and his son Periander (657-585 B. C.), Corinth became the richest city of continental Greece. Its commercial importance was due to its situation at the head of the gulf which bears its name, making it the port of departure for all shipping to the west. One of the chief activities of the tyrants was the strengthening of Corinthian power along the north-west coast of Greece, the route to Italy and Sicily. Kypselos subjected the powerful colony, Corcyra, which had made itself independent. His three younger sons—Gorgos, Echiades and Pylades—conquered the island of Leukas from the Acarnanians, cut a canal through the neck of sand connecting it with the mainland, and founded colonies on the Ambracian Gulf as well as farther north in Epirus. In the course of these operations they may well have come into conflict with a town, Herakleia, and have dedicated a portion of the spoils taken at its capture to the Olympian Zeus in the form of a gold bowl weighing a hundred staters. A town of this name is known to have been situated on the Ambracian gulf. That the dedicators should have called themselves by the patronymic, *Κυψελίδαι*, seems perfectly natural, whether they were acting as the representatives of their father or their brother, Periander. This interpretation of the inscription, which was first suggested by Professor S. N. Deane, cannot be proved to be correct. There is, however, nothing improbable about it; on the contrary, it seems far more unlikely that a forger should have hit upon such a combination.

It has only been possible here faintly to suggest the interest of this relic from the age of the tyrants. The bowl is more than a unique example of early Greek goldsmith's work. It is a historical document, shedding light on the origins of the alphabet, of weight standards and of coinage, as well as on the expansion of Corinth under the Kypselids. It invites the beholder to study the traditions of mingled fact and legend preserved by Herodotus, or, better still, to read the fragments of the contemporary poets, Archilochus, Theognis and the rest, who reflect the spirit of those turbulent times in language having itself the pure bloom of gold. The bowl has been well called "a romantic, dream-inviting treasure."

L. D. C.



Corinthian Stater: about 600 B. C.